



# A Study of Yoruba Culture in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*

<sup>1</sup>Simran, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Ramandeep Mahal

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,

<sup>1</sup> Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University) Mullana, Ambala, India

**Abstract :** Wole Soyinka is a well-known Nigerian dramatist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 for his contributions to African literature. He is the African continent's most prolific writer and a multi-talented genius. His works are inspired by the African Yoruba society, its culture, customs, and politics. Soyinka's dramatic environment has been expanded with a diverse realistic scenario depicting African life extremely accurately, as well as trends and characters holding up a mirror to nature and presenting life as it is. His literary output demonstrates an undeniable creative and critical anchoring in African myths, legends, and history in which he noticed underlying dramatic aspects which could be stretched into theatre. Soyinka's utilisation of Yoruba cultural tradition as a way of living in Africa is the subject of this research. His plays are based on Yoruba songs, dances, and stories, among other things. As a result, in his play *A Dance of the Forests*, the playwright strives to portray Yoruba culture in a Western theatrical form.

**Keywords:** Wole Soyinka, God, Yoruba Culture, earth, African tradition

## INTRODUCTION

Among Commonwealth countries, India and Africa have a very identical colonial heritage, but African literature stands out among the new commonwealth literatures for its freshness. Wole Soyinka is one of Africa's most prolific writers. He was the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. His name is synonymous with his work in the theatre. Wole Soyinka is a traditional African dramatist who adopted Yoruba culture as his own way of life.

In an interview with Appiah in *An Evening with Wole Soyinka*, Soyinka remarks,

"We believe that there are various areas of existence, all of which interact, interlock in a pattern of continuity: the world of the ancestor, the world of the living, and the world of the unborn. The process of transitioning between these many realms is ongoing and has been greatly improved. The role of ritual, of sacrifice – whether it's a ram or a chicken – and of seasonal ceremonies, for example, is in fact linked to the ease of transition between these multiple worlds." <sup>1</sup>

He has brought together the past and the present, as well as the western dramatic skills that had an impact on him during his early years in England. Soyinka has drawn on Africa's past to illustrate Nigeria's current social, political, and economic issues following independence.

Soyinka's main source of inspiration is Yoruba cultural tradition, that he mixes with other African practises and beliefs. Yoruba mythological figures, stories, rituals, and festivals play an important role in

Soyinka's plays. The theatrical philosophy of Wole Soyinka is founded on Ogun mythology. In Yoruba ritual or the "Mysteries of Ogun," he described the origins of Yoruba tragedy. The fragmentation of Orisa-nla, the original deity of all God, according to Yoruba metaphysics, gave birth to the entire Yoruba pantheon and humanity. Deities and mankind were separated by the transitional chasm. According to Yoruba Culture, man is continuously troubled by the knowledge that he has lost the eternal essence of his being, and he strives to reclaim his entire being.

The Yoruba people resided in Nigeria's south-western region, where they accounted for around 20% of the population. They were thought to have come from the Middle East and settled in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. They were a religious group comprised of Christians, Muslims, and others who held traditional views. The Yoruba are mostly active in the commercial media and educational sectors of the nation. The Yoruba people have a variety of origin legends, but they all stem from the same progenitor, "Oduduwa." According to one narrative, he travelled from Mecca after being driven from his house owing to his belief in deities, and subsequently lived in Ile-Ife, where he created a dynasty that was later extended by his offspring. Another theory claims that he was an ordinary Yoruba man who wanted to overthrow the ruling elite. Another mythology claims that God sent Oduduwa (the Yoruba father) from heaven to create the planet and humanity. His lieutenants took him down from heaven and landed in Ile-Ife, where he completed his mission. The connection that allowed him to arrive on Earth is said to still reside in the monument, albeit it is concealed from prying eyes.

According to this legend, Ile-Ife is not just the Yoruba people's, but the whole race's support system. He swayed with a handful of sand and a cock in his hands, stretching the sand over the water-covered ground and the cock expanding the sand all over the earth, forming land. These ancient Yorubas have been conquering their fatherland since the founding of the Yoruba religion. Prior to the entrance of Christianity and Islam, the Yoruba people had their own religion, believing in different deities depending on where they lived. Sango (Thunder God), Ogun (Iron God), Sopoona (Smallpox God), Yemoja, and many more Gods are among them. These are considered to be the middlemen between God (Olodumare) and man.

The Yoruba worldview and associated rituals provide nourishment to the traditional Yoruba world. Yoruba metaphysics encourages believers to believe in the four realms of existence. The world of the living, the world of the dead, and the world of the unborn are all related in Yoruba cosmology by the supernatural passage of transition. Yoruba cosmology demonstrates that these three states of existence are interconnected. As a result, a human being can exist in three different states, each of which requires traversing a transitory gulf to move from one state to the next. The Yoruba hold ancestors in high regard, and when a person dies physically in the world of the living, he or she joins the ancestors in the world of the dead. "In the Yoruba worldview, the unborn world is as obviously older than the living world as the living world is older than the ancestor-world." During egungun rituals, community members dressed in egungun masks physically brought the deceased ancestors back into the world of the living. This philosophical premise is central to Soyinka's works, such as *A Dance of the Forests*.

In the setting of West African spiritualism, *A Dance of the Forests* depicted a complicated interplay between gods, mortals, and the dead with the ultimate goal of experiencing one's own self-discovery. The Yoruba's notion of time is flexible and non-linear, which is reflected in the way their culture is portrayed in drama: Gods, mortals, ancestors, and spirits are all represented in the plays. Soyinka depicts as figures three important deities who are commonly regarded as having extraordinary powers: Ogun, Eshu, and the Forest Head (Obatala) (Eshuoru). Soyinka illustrated a disagreement between the gods, which finally influences the lives and destinies of mankind, through this choice of words. There is only one supreme creator, and he is known as Obatala. In the Yoruba tradition, he is revered as a god of purity and morality. The Yoruba trickster god was known as Eshuoru. He is a prankster who symbolises the randomness of life. Mischief-making ensues because of his lack of respect for authority.

The god of conflict is Ogun in the Yoruba pantheon, nevertheless the deity of iron too, as a result warriors, hunters, blacksmiths, truck drivers, railroad workers, and artists worship him. He is a deity of many paradoxes, but he is most renowned for both being the god of creation and the god of elimination. The three gods were all interested in influencing the fortunes of the forest dwellers, which exacerbated the situation since gods used their unique skills to both destroy and protect their humans.

According to the West African concept of Animism, "souls reside in things and natural phenomena such as trees, hills, streams, seas, and rocks," Soyinka included spirits that governed the universe alongside deities. The spirits gathered in the Forest Father's court to discuss their problems and come up with answers. The integration of spirits here aims to portray a holistic cultural order in which the ultimate deity's might brings all components of the world together in harmonic oneness. Human figures were also separated into three groups: those who were alive, those who had died, and those who were yet to be born. In addition to the forest travellers who resided in the domain of the living, Soyinka urged ancestors from ancient times to rejuvenate via ceremonial ancestor worship. Furthermore, the play's final dance is focused on a fight to possess the unborn child of a deceased lady.

The performance became alive with creatures from many levels of existence and natures, as Osita Okagbue argues in *"Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre."* "For Africans, there is no such thing as a final, completed, or permanent site of existence. The living die and become ancestors; the unborn are born to become the living; and the ancestors might return to being unborn." (5) The play starts and finishes outside of the forest in chronological sequence, but the most of the action takes place within the forest over the length of one night, in the metaphysical time of the dream, which moves freely between past, present, and future.

During rituals for forefather worship, characters in the play move between the world of the living and the dead. When they do this, they experience a kind of mobility between the worlds of the living and dead. Gods, humans possessed by real spirits, and unborn children all live together and interact in that scene. In Yoruba culture, time changes all the time, and this scene shows that. There were a lot of people who were interested in *A Dance of the Forests*, not just the people in Nigeria who thought it was a very good show of their culture, but also people who were more familiar with European traditions and worldviews. Soyinka uses symbols of gods and spirits, myths and rituals, songs and dancing and mime as parts of a feast in some of his work. He uses Yoruba culture because the songs and tonal rhythms are in tune with the drums and the dancing, and all three things are part of the ritual itself, so he can't separate them. Thus, he owes a lot to traditional culture, which helped shape the country's reputation as a good place to live.

## Conclusion

Among new commonwealth literatures, African literature stands out for its novelty. Inspiration comes from Yoruba culture, which Soyinka mixed with other African ideas. About 20% of Nigerians are Yoruba. Middle Eastern origins, they migrated to Europe in the Middle Ages. Prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the Yoruba practised their own religions. Yoruba metaphysics says a person can be in one of three states, and moving between them requires passing through a gap. During egungun rites, people physically resurrected their ancestors. Ogun is a war deity who is also a creator and destroyer. Affecting the woodland dwellers' lives was a goal for all three gods. "Souls exist in objects and natural events," Soyinka said, adding spirits to deities. Changing time is important in Yoruba culture. *A Dance of the Forests* captivated many. It is traditional culture that shaped Soyinka's reputation as a good writer.

## REFERENCES

[1] Appiah, Anthony. "An Evening with Wole Soyinka." *Black American Literature Forum* 22.4: (1988). 777-785. JSTOR. Web. 25 Oct. 2011.

- [2] Soyinka, Wole. "The Fourth Stage." Appendix to Myth, Literature, and the African World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, 1978, 1990. 140-160 P.
- [3] Soyinka, Wole. Myth, Literature and the African World. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976
- [4] William S., II Haney. "A Dance of the Forests." Master plots II: Drama, Revised Edition. Salem Press, 2004.eNotes.com. 2006. 27 May, 2009
- [5] Okagbue, Osita. African Theatres and Performances. London: Routledge, 2007
- [6] ... Culture and Identity in Africa and Caribbean Theatre. (London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd, 2009)148.
- [7] Soyinka, Wole. A Dance of the Forests. Five Plays. London: Oxford UP, 1964.
- [8] Hala M. Altuwaijri. Cosmology and Politics in Wole Soyinka's "A Dance of the Forests" Soyinka, Wole. Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture. Ibadan: New H

